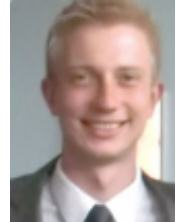


There was no rise in Scottish nationalism: Understanding the SNP victory

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It is a mistake, committed by many, to equate a substantial SNP vote with an alleged rise in nationalism or nationalist sentiment in Scotland, argues [Jan Eichhorn](#). The evidence indicates the contrary: data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey suggests that fewer people emphasise their Scottish national identity distinctively.

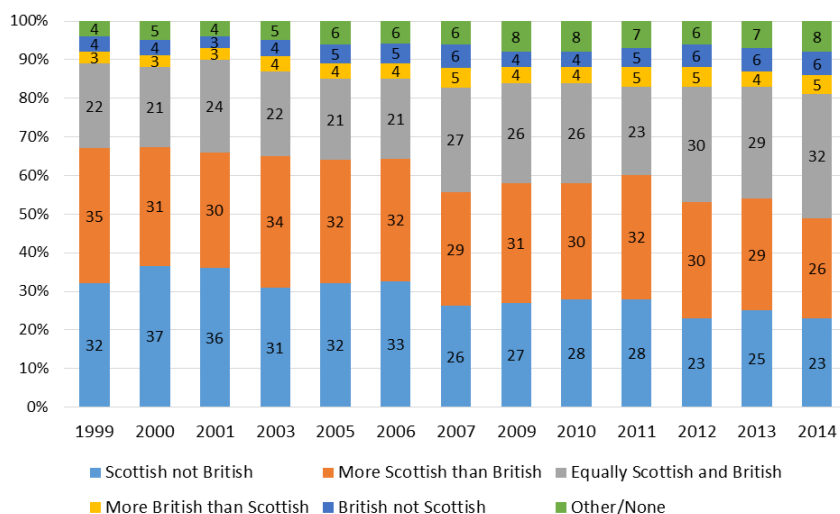


The 2015 general election will be memorable for many reasons, a key one being the remarkable victory of the SNP gaining 56 of 59 seats in Scotland (increasing their share dramatically from just 6 seats in 2010). Naturally, such a landslide attracts the focus of journalists, commentators and politicians who aim to assess the outcome of the election. Since the exit polls closed a lot of people have tried to make sense of what happened in Scotland. Unfortunately a lot of them made statements that have to be rejected as simply inaccurate.

It is a mistake, committed by many, to equate a substantial SNP vote with an alleged rise in nationalism or nationalist sentiment in Scotland. It may seem a plausible assumption to engage with (if you do not understand the attitudes of the Scottish electorate), but it cannot be supported by any empirical evidence. To the contrary: the best evidence we have to give us a long term perspective, data from the high-quality, face-to-face Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) suggests that, if anything, fewer people than before emphasise their Scottish national identity distinctively.

The figure below summarises how people in Scotland weigh their Scottish identity in comparison to their British identity. They have not become un-Scottish since the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999: The proportion of people in Scotland that says they identify as more British than Scottish or British only remains small at just over 10 per cent. However, at the other end of spectrum we have seen some quite substantial change.

Figure 1: Scottish and British National Identity in Scotland, SSA 1999-2014



Until 2006 each year around two thirds of respondents said that they felt more Scottish than British or Scottish and not British at all. At the same time, only just over one in five rated their Scottishness equally to their Britishness. This has changed with the numbers of those not favouring one identity over the other increasing since the SNP began to form the government in Scotland following the Scottish Parliament elections of 2007. In the year of the

independence referendum, nearly one third of respondents fell into this middle group, while those singularly identifying as Scottish only had dropped from over a third in the early years of devolution to just under a quarter.

To just make the point absolutely clear: Scottish identity or sentiment has not been increasing, but decreasing gradually since the advent of devolution. There has not been a higher relative level of emphasising Britishness in Scotland than in the year when the referendum on its independence was held.

To those who study Scottish political attitudes that is not a surprise. In 2011, when the Scottish Parliament elections saw the SNP get an absolute majority of seats (with around 45 per cent of the vote), support for independence was at the lowest level recorded by the SSA with just one in four Scots supporting it. Amongst those who voted SNP, over 40 per cent were not in favour of independence at the time. While support for independence has grown of course since (and reached 45 per cent in last year's referendum), this tells us an important message about SNP support: The SNP has not gained voters because it could increase the feeling of national identity, but has done so for other reasons. And in this general election they were able to translate the 2011 support from Scotland to the UK level (and gain some additional votes).

Crucially, commentators need to stop painting a picture in which the majority of Scotland predominantly base their political decision making mostly on their national identity. There has been no rise in nationalistic sentiment in Scotland. As we (amongst others) have repeatedly shown in our research, the strongest determinants of both independence and SNP support were pragmatic evaluations about economic prospects, trustworthiness and political personnel. For most people in Scotland the SNP is a normal party, that they like, hate or are indifferent to, but those evaluations for most are based on whether people agree with their policies and how they evaluate their representation.

If commentators want to understand why the SNP is successful, they need to make a greater effort at properly understanding how public attitudes are formed in Scotland. Suggesting that it is down to sentiment is lazy at best, but actually misrepresenting the majority of Scottish voters. For political parties trying to challenge the SNP, first and foremost Scottish Labour, a similar message applies: to have a chance of engaging them successfully, they need to stop focusing mostly on high-level questions about different types of nationality. Instead they need to challenge the SNP on concrete policy debates around issues that affect people's lives and which voters in Scotland are much more likely to base their votes on than identity-driven arguments.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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